

Quarter-horses return to Fort Erie

Posted By BRAD PETERS , REVIEW SPORTS EDITOR
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Well, it may not be your father's horse racing, but the executives at the Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium are willing to bet that quarter-horse racing will draw more fans to the historic border oval.

Tuesday, the track released its plans to introduce the quarter-horse racing at the facility. Wading cautiously into the new racing waters, Fort Erie will roll out its pilot project in which the fast horses will race mainly on Saturdays throughout October.

The first three Saturdays in October -- Oct. 2, 9 and 16 -- will see full-day quarter-horse race cards. The closing weekend for the meet -- Saturday, Oct. 23 and Sunday, Oct. 24 -- will feature a mixed race card of thoroughbred and quarter-horse racing as an exciting wrap-up to the 2010 season.

Currently, the only other track to offer quarter-horses is Ajax Downs.

"It's great to see the plans for the racing program start to come together," said Jim Thibert, chief executive officer of the consortium. "With three additional days added to our 2010 meet, we're seeing growth and expansion of racing here at Fort Erie. Adding quarter-horse racing brings an exciting new racing and wagering product that enhances our thoroughbred program and we are really hoping that the Canadian and American owners and trainers of the American quarterhorses respond with enthusiasm to our offer to present a new venue in Canada and so close to the border of America.



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"Quarter-horse racing takes sprint racing to a whole new level. Quarter-horses have records for 100 yards at less than seven seconds, and two furlongs at less than 21. We are hoping to card some match races between thoroughbred and quarterhorses -- that would be exciting racing action!"

That exciting racing action has been a long time coming for those who have been working to make it happen. Sue Leslie, the president of the Ontario Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, said in a March interview with the Niagara Falls Review that she expected to be making an announcement on quarter-horse racing "in the next two or three weeks." But she's pleased the announcement has been made, even if it is 4 1/2 months later.

"Part of the consortium's agreement with the province involved starting the quarterhorses at Fort Erie," she said. "The province put the Ontario Racing Commission, our regulator, in charge of the pilot project. I don't mean to say this in any negative way, but as you know, there's a certain amount of bureaucracy any time you deal with government bodies ... so, it's taken a lot longer than I would have anticipated."

With the dates set, it's now a matter of gauging the horse-men's interest and the public's response to the new gaming product before any long-term plans are finalized.

"We are going to have to judge how the pilot in October works, then we're going to have to form the going-forward days that should happen for 2011 and '12," Leslie said. "I anticipate that quarter-horse racing will start earlier than October (in subsequent years), but we have to see how this first session goes."

And there are a lot of factors to consider on whether the quarter-horse experiment is a success: Owner and public interest; how the wagering goes; what the actual quarter-horse population is and whether the track attracts participants from the surrounding area (local and U.S.).

But the one factor that Leslie stressed above all others was that the introduction of the quarterhorses must be a positive step forward for the long-term viability of the border oval and thoroughbred racing.

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"The intent of the pilot project is not to take away from the thoroughbred racing," she said. "If that were to happen, we would have to take a serious look at what we are doing.

"The intent is that this will promote live on-track betting at Fort Erie, that it helps expand the quarter-horse industry and that it makes some money for the Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium."

To that end, the consortium, though wading into the pilot project, sees the potential to develop a new revenue stream and is looking ahead to the subsequent years of the pilot project.

"With a good supply of entries, we expect to run 30 to 40 quarter-horse races this October, as a test of the logistics of merging quarter-horses into our existing thoroughbred operations," said Rick Cowan, chief operating officer for the Fort Erie track. "You can expect to hear details on purses and race conditions over the next couple of weeks."

"This is Year 1 of a three-year pilot project that will see quarter-horse racing at Fort Erie through to the 2012 racing season. We're focused on making sure that we start off right, with full cards of good racing this year. We'll spend time at the end of year to plan how a mixed thoroughbred/quarter-horse meet will look for 2011 and 2012," Cowan said.

The Fort Erie Live Racing Consortium is comprised of representatives from Fort Erie Economic Development & Tourism Corporation, the Town of Fort Erie and the Ontario Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association, and is a not-for-profit organization responsible for operating the century old Fort Erie Race Track for the next three years.

bpeters@nfreview.com